

## *Book Reviews*

*Learning True Love — How I Learned and Practised Social Change in Vietnam.* By Chân Không Cao Ngọc Phương. Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1993. Pp. 258. Photographs.

*Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thích Nhất Hạnh.* By Thích Nhất Hạnh. Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1993. Pp. 182, Photographs and drawings.

Accounts of Buddhist protest movements have been mostly covered by works of historical genre. Through her autobiography, Sister Chân Không gives us an insider's view of the years of turmoil up until the present. Being transcribed originally from her talks to participants of retreats led by Reverend (Thầy) Thích Nhất Hạnh, her mentor, friend and associate, the text retains some immediacy of the verbal mode with its charm and engaging spontaneity. The narrative takes us from the eastern Mekong delta to Saigon, to Hue and overseas, with a widening scope and horizon of her passionate concern for a Buddhist solution to the human suffering she has witnessed.

For each type of her undertakings, in chronological order, we are regularly presented with her experience of an external happening together with personal reaction to and/or reflections on it. This is not only a moving individual saga, it is also a rare window to all manner of wretchedness and inhumanity inflicted by Vietnamese on each other. Specialists as well as general readers would be enriched by a firsthand account that counterbalances objectivist or biased outsiders' documented narratives. And graphic TV images of wounded children, she also reminds us more than once, cannot be compared with the desperate intensity of actually carrying an infant victim of bombing in one's arms.

However, the story is not all sad. It is dotted with delightful surprises,

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at times with cameos of subtle facets of human relationship which, I suspect, are humorous despite the author's intention. For example, reunited with Reverend Thích Nhất Hạnh in 1968 after a traumatic two-year period, she describes: "I wished I could sob in his arms, but, at that time, Thàỵ had not yet taught us *hugging meditation*" [italics added].

This is a candid and cascading flow of memorabilia, gushing but never turbulent, like the events from which it was wrought. For it is told with the sensitive recollections of a scientist who practises the art of meditation, with a lifetime dedication to the welfare of slum dwellers around Saigon, and later to victims of war, poverty, and oppression all over Vietnam. We may well classify this a fine example of either history of social work, or religious, or political biography, but it seems to be all these, and above all, a good read. Owing to the paucity of accounts from perspectives like hers, it will prove an important contribution towards a more comprehensive picture of contemporary Vietnam.

The brief glossary of Vietnamese Buddhist terms in the introductory part of the book seems to give a metonymic quality to those key issues and notions young adherents of contemporary Buddhism of her time tried to grapple with. They included questions about compassion and its miraculous power as symbolized by Kwan Yin (Avalokitesvara), or about devoidness/openness (*sunyata*) as expounded in the Heart Sutra. In the hurly-burly of action, those kinds of questions would come up again and again to confront the "new" Buddhist welfare workers. By taking different initiatives to help the poor since the early 1960s, younger Buddhists have engaged the "conservative" hierarchy in a philosophical debate. For Buddhist activists, involvement in the world (*nhập thế*) now meant they would be faced with paradoxes such as "giving is an agent-free act", or more drastically, "self-immolation is compassionate", and with them, a redefinition of identities. And for Sister Chân Không particularly, these identities included: to be a Vietnamese woman, a Buddhist, an intellectual, a sentient being on earth ...

Curiously though, efforts to modernize Buddhism in the 1960s brought back the ghost of the debate between Marxists and Buddhists three decades earlier. In the new contention, soteriological polemics no

longer circled around the twin issues of anti-colonialism and modernization. Instead, the former topic lost relevance and the latter was mooted within the Buddhist community. The national Buddhist Church's hands-off attitude towards politics was also a political strategy, which could be criticized as an excuse for inaction and servitude. But more than just criticizing the hierarchy, the Thích Nhất Hạnh group did their best to extend their work to global politics of non-violence.

If Marxist anti-colonial rhetoric was less relevant to Buddhist radicals like her, Chân Không seems to say, it was because during the war, both antagonistic sides in this politics were identical in their murderous repressive measures. Moreover, in Southern Vietnam, some Buddhists' protest to the incumbent government about their trampled rights of religious expression thirty years ago remains essentially the same in 1993.

Little experience in social work is needed to empathize with much of what she describes — the urgency, danger, and passion engendered by direct services. It would take equally little imagination to realize how this work must relate to other social issues, to national or international politics, if it were to go beyond the “band-aid syndrome”. The decisive answer given early on by Thích Nhất Hạnh was that no social change could be possible without an immediate ending to the armed conflict. Thus the work for peace, for the environment, for refugees evolved, confronting the anti-communist and the communist camps alike. As a result, his Buddhist group was ruthlessly dealt with by the warring sides. Thus we gain some insight into the complex scene of struggle during the heady 1960s and 1970s in South Vietnam, notably the Third Force alternative championed by Buddhist social workers in such a polarized environment. We also learn from this something of an historical background to the human rights protests in and outside Vietnam at present.

The continued marginalization of Thích Nhất Hạnh's group within and without South Vietnam's Buddhist hierarchy shows how nuanced and gradated the spectrum of political opinions was. As with many Southeast Asian countries, the road to real political pluralism has been tortuous. In her condemnation of the cruelty and hypocrisy of those in

power, the author asserted her distinct “social welfare” stance in that spectrum. Nevertheless, when she uses the term “Hanoi government” as if it signifies a monolithic body, I wonder if she could be herself entrapped in the old politics, and neglects to consider its hegemonic structure, or how fragile and contested communist domination could be. Perhaps with Chân Không’s story, “that war” can now be put to rest as Maxine Hong Kingston suggests. Unfortunately, it is not the case with power under the old pretext of one-dimensional politics of “oppressors and liberators” which tends to conceal the multi-faceted oppression which intrudes into human relations at all levels and in all spheres of activities of Vietnamese life.

Thích Nhất Hạnh’s collected poems however present a different atmosphere and tenor. This talented author, lecturer, Zen meditation teacher has touched on many of the same issues of contemporary Vietnam in his years of active involvement which we glean through Chân Không’s book. The poems are divided into two parts, the “historical” and the “ultimate dimensions” as they are entitled, indicating the double aspects of their context. There are footnotes to most poems to explain at least their origin. Records of both experiences of the suffering of others and of personal insights, the poems describe outer and inner landscapes, and in describing, they instruct.

The collection is a concise text to illuminate the work and philosophy of his group. It also helps crystallize many paradoxes: to be passionate yet detached, to savour inner peace amidst the horror of war, or to explore timelessness but keep the fire of hope burning. The paradoxes never cease, as Thích Nhất Hạnh continually surprises us with his creative handling of images. He has lived under the buffeting forces of power politics, but knows that power radiates from each of us — like it can from the stillness of our hand:

*... waiting for the moment  
to reverse the balance of Sky and Earth —  
my hand,  
this small hand,  
is like a mountain*

— Mudra